

SISERA'S MOTHER IN JUDGES 5 AND HAIM GOURI'S ʕIMMÔ*

by

WILLIAM J. URBROCK

University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh, WI 54901

Introduction

Of the three major female characters in Judges 5 (The Song of Deborah) only the first two, Deborah and Jael, are properly named. The other is known only as "the mother of Sisera" (ʕēm sîsērāʕ). This essay will examine first how this naming device combines with the poem's schematic arrangement of blessing and curse to distance Sisera's mother from a reader's sympathy, leaving her an object for derision. Next, an examination of the poem ʕImmô ('His Mother') by modern Israeli poet Haim Gouri will highlight how Gouri shifts the point of view so as to evoke our sympathy for this noblewoman who lost her son.

1. Sisera's Mother in Judges 5

Many scholars already have drawn attention to the biting dramatic irony that marks the portrayal of Sisera's mother in the Song of Deborah. Abraham Birman (1968, p. 22), for example, notes that "savage satire . . . flourished from time immemorial" in Israel and was directed mainly against her enemies. The Song of Deborah, in particular, he cites as "a fine example of taunting verse" as it "hurls ridicule at Sisera's mother who is waiting for her son, unaware that he has been defeated and slain."

Alan Hauser (1980, p. 138) in a study of parataxis in Judges 5 called attention to the stark juxtaposition and abrupt transition from the "active and bloody scene of the slaying of Sisera to the passive and pensive" picture of "Sisera's mother and her ladies making excuses to themselves for Sisera's delay." The overall effect, he notes, is one of

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dramatic irony: while the Canaanite ladies fantasize¹ about great quantities of booty, the audience knows otherwise. Readers are enticed to recall what they have already learned, that YHWH and the Israelites have been victorious, the Canaanites have been routed, and Sisera is dead.

Similarly, Robert Alter emphasizes how the scene of Sisera's mother and her "circle of Canaanite court ladies" with what he calls its "gloating, illusory anticipation of the spoils of war" reverberates ironically both in mood and individual details with the previous scene in Jael's tent. It stands "in shocking contrast to the still lingering—or perhaps synchronous—image of the Canaanite general felled by the hand of a woman" (1985, pp. 46–47). The effect, he concludes, is to sharpen "the edge of triumphal harshness in the story" (p. 49).

Finally, Wilfred Watson (1984, p. 311), like Hauser and Alter, also identifies the dramatic or situational irony in Judg 5:29–30 which "heighten[s] the defeat of the enemy." Elsewhere (p. 308) he notes that an effect of such irony is to increase the distance between the speakers and the listeners, in this case since the former are ignorant of the real situation of which the audience is all too aware.

Sometimes, by the way, irony may increase distance between listener and listener or reader and reader, since from their individual points of view some may be "in the know" so as to appreciate the irony, while others may miss the point. In the case of Sisera's mother, however, the Song and its prose antecedent in Judges 4 have put all of us who read or listen in the know, so that we may all take part in the triumphal taunting of these high and mighty ladies who, unwittingly, already have been brought low.

I do not wish to dwell on the socio-historical background of the Song. It is not out of place, however, to remind ourselves of the many recent studies on the emergence of Israel as a peasant revolution against the rulers and military elite of the Canaanite city-states.² If such indeed is

1. There is some uncertainty about who is actually doing the fantasizing in v. 29. The usual interpretation is that while her wise ladies make reply to her questions about the delay of her son, Sisera's mother *also* answers her own question with the thoughts that follow in v. 30. But there is precedent in some of the ancient Versions (Syr, Vulg) for reading v. 29 something like: "The wisest [sg.] of her ladies answers her // Yea, she returns words to her." So Cross (1950, pp. 28, 39). Boling (1975, pp. 105, 115) paraphrases: "The wisest of her captains' ladies answers her // Indeed, she returns her own words to her." Birman (1968, p. 22) simply reads, "Her ladies, so knowing, reply."

2. A recent excellent overview of the present state of the discussion is afforded in Freedman and Graf (1983), which features articles by George E. Mendenhall and Norman E. Gottwald, two of the leading scholars (not necessarily in agreement with each other) associated with these studies. An outstanding bibliography is provided in the same volume

the socio-historical context of the Song, its ironic taunting of Sisera, his mother, and her "wise" ladies becomes all the more understandable.

Let me turn, rather, to two other rhetorical devices in the Song that complement the ironic tone in working to distance Sisera's mother from us. First, naming. Watson (1984, p. 133) and others have noted the frequent occurrence of the epithetic word pair pattern PN_1 // son of PN_2 . Examples include Balaq // son of Zippor (Num 23:18), David // son of Jesse (2 Sam 20:2), and Hazael // son of Hadad (Amos 1:4). Evidently, the poetic word pair is generated by the simple breakup of the stock legal phraseology, " PN_1 , son of PN_2 ." In the Song of Deborah epithetic word pairs identify the Israelite *šôpēṭ* Shamgar // son of Anat (v. 6) and the designated leader of the Israelite forces under Deborah, Baraq // son of Abinoam (v. 12). Sisera, whose epithet is "general of Jabin's army" in the prose of Judges 4, is simply identified by his proper name in the Song.

But the Song also features feminine figures, which is our major concern here. Of them, three are identified by proper names: Deborah, mother in Israel (v. 7); Jael, wife of Heber the Qenite (v. 24)³; and the town Meroz (v. 23), which need not figure in our discussion. It is noteworthy, I feel, that Deborah, who is identified as the "prophetess, wife of Lappidoth" in the prose account (4:4), here in the Song stands quite on her own, drawing identity neither from her parentage nor her spouse. She is "mother in Israel."

Besides Deborah and Jael, the other major feminine figure, of course, is Sisera's mother. She is not identified by a proper name. She is defined only as the enemy's mother, and she is literally hedged about in the poem by the name of her vanquished son, which appears in vv. 20 and 26 before she is introduced and again, after we have met her, in v. 30. Further, known only by her epithet "mother of Sisera," a title, after all, that in other circumstances might be designed to bring honor to a childbearing woman, she is the polar opposite to Deborah, "mother in Israel." The poetic inclusion simply heightens the disparity.

She is, therefore, a "lonely figure," somewhat on the order of Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11. Also this young woman receives no proper name in the text. Indeed, unlike the highborn (we suppose) "mother of Sisera," she was the product of an illegitimate father and an unnamed mother, a

by Marvin L. Chaney in his article on "Ancient Palestinian Peasant Movements and the Formation of Premonarchic Israel."

3. Cross (1950, p. 37), like many others and *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, thinks the epithet has been interpolated from Judg 4:17, since it appears to interrupt the stichometry.

harlot grandmother and an unnamed grandfather. But, Jephthah's daughter, after all, as Phyllis Tribble has pointed out (1984, p. 106), "became a tradition in Israel." She was remembered for good, "because the women with whom she chose to spend her last days have not let her pass into oblivion" but "established a testimony: activities of mourning reiterated yearly in a special place" (pp. 106-7). There is no such mitigation in the case of Sisera's mother. Known only by the name of her son, presented as the now childless foil to "Deborah, mother in Israel," she sinks into oblivion with the other unnamed women present with her actually or imaginatively in the palace scene, the wisest of her women and the presumed victims (*raḥam raḥāmāyīm*)⁴ of the battlefield.

Even more powerfully persuasive in putting Sisera's mother at a distance from us, the readers of the Song, is, I believe, the schematic arrangement of blessing and curse in the text (see Appendix 1). While, as we just noted, Sisera's mother is set off from the rest of the Song by the naming of Sisera in vv. 26 and 30, Deborah and Jael literally are hedged around by blessings. In the case of Deborah the sense of blessing is increased by what appears to be punning on the name of her general Baraq (sounds like *bārēk*, 'to bless') and by the concentration of references to YHWH (note vv. 2-5, 9, 11 and 13). There even may be a pun on blessing in v. 8, *yibḥar*, although the sense of the poetic colon is not clear in the context of a line which Boling (1975, p. 109) characterizes as "notoriously difficult to translate." It is clear, however, that Deborah-YHWH-blessing are linked repeatedly in the early portion of the Song so as to make a powerful impression on our mind. Jael, too, is protected, as it were, by the beautiful ring structure (a sort of miniature inclusion) of v. 24, which begins and ends with the exclamation *tēbōrak*, 'Blessed!' Indeed, the blessing is made even more emphatic by its stark contrast to the curse just pronounced on Meroz in v. 23.

Sisera's mother, however, like Sisera himself, *literally* stands outside the realm of blessing in the text. Her twice repeated *maddûa*^c, *maddûa*^c ('Why? why?') seems to echo the *lāmāh*, *lāmāh* ('Why? why?') directed earlier at Reuben and Dan. Although neither was really cursed, there seems to be at least some chiding of the loyalty of these two tribes. By implication, Sisera's mother chides herself by her own questions. Next,

4. Usually translated "a girl/maiden/damsel or two," the context would appear to demand a coarser equivalent. Watson (1984, p. 248) suggests "a wench, two wenches." Alter (1985, p. 46) makes a similar observation: "The rare term that I, like other translators, have represented with the courtly 'damsel' is actually derived transparently from the word for 'womb,' and so might in ancient usage have meant something much coarser than 'damsel.'"

her epithet, ʔēm sîsērāʔ ('mother of Sisera'), uttered but once in the Song, follows hard upon the last mention of Sisera—šādûd (Sisera—'slain!') in vv. 26–27. Furthermore, the transition from blessing (vv. 2, 9) on Deborah and the loyal tribal fighters of Israel to curse on Meroz and its inhabitants (v. 23) disposes us to expect a similar transition as we move from the blessed Jael to the mother of doomed Sisera. And we are not mistaken in the expectation. For, ironically, to be sure, it is precisely she and her wise women, who, along with Sisera and the kings of Canaan, are the raped and despoiled of the Song. The point is driven home by the repeated references to spoil (šālāl, 4 times) in v. 30.⁵ By the time we reach the double wish of v. 31, we have no doubts whatsoever as to who serve in the Song as the exemplars of the curse, "Thus may perish all the enemies of YHWH!" Nor are we left guessing as to the blessed examples of those who "love" YHWH (covenant terminology) and who, like him, burst forth in full strength like the sun.⁶

2. *Sisera's Mother in Haim Gouri's ʔImmô*

Haim Gouri was born in Tel Aviv in 1923 and later attended Kaduri agricultural school. As a young man he served in the Palmach, the mobilized striking force of the Haganah, the Jewish underground military organization that operated in Palestine from 1920 to 1948 and was forerunner of the Israel Defense Forces. Gouri fought in the War of Independence and after the war studied French literature at Hebrew University and the Sorbonne. In 1954 he began writing a weekly column in the daily *Lammerhab*. But already in 1945 his first published poem had appeared in the Hebrew daily *ʕAl-hammišmār*. Over the years he has published over a half-dozen volumes of poetry, a powerful novel about two Holocaust survivors in post-war Berlin entitled *ʕIsqat haššhōqôlad* (*The Chocolate Deal*), an important chronicle on the Eichmann trial conducted in Jerusalem from May to September 1961, and *Dappîm yêrûšalmiyyîm*. The latter includes a diary of the author's experience as co-commander of the Jerusalem Brigade during the Six Day War.⁷

5. Adele Berlin (1985, p. 122) draws attention to the effective use of multiple sound pairs in v. 30: šālāl, 4 times; šebaʕ, šebāʕîm, 3 times; the duplication of raḥam raḥāmāyîm and riqmah riqmāyîm; the assonance in lērôʕ, lēsîsērāʔ and lēšawwêʔrê. The resultant poetic effect is one of sustained plundering as the things plundered merge in sound and vision: "the men swirl women around their heads and colored cloths around their necks—so that the women and their colorful clothing become one image."

6. Note the interesting inclusion on YŠʔ in vv. 4a and 31b.

7. Helpful biographical materials on Gouri may be found in Bargat and Chyet (1986, pp. 57–59) and in Megged (1971–72, cols. 832–34).

Several commentators detect in Gouri's later works the expression of a poignant contrast between a lost world of fighters and heroes, now alive only in memories, and the present in which Gouri may feel somewhat of an alien even in his own homeland. A sense of estrangement and disillusionment seems present in these works.⁸

Gouri also has attempted to draw upon Biblical traditions, perhaps as a path to rediscovering, at a higher level, a way of identifying with a more collective human experience. In his essay, "Poetry in Israel," Robert Alter (1969, p. 248) has written that "More than anything else, what makes Hebrew poetry different is the vital presence of the Bible—through remembered words, phrases, verses, whole passages, themes, and symbols—in the mind of every genuinely literate user of Hebrew."

In his poem *ʔImmô* ('His Mother') (see Appendix 2)⁹ Gouri's use of Deborah's Song is obvious to anyone acquainted with Judges 5. Indeed, he identifies the Song in his opening line and later even quotes a portion of Judg 5:30. All the more impressive, therefore, is the power of his art to reverse our sympathies. For, while the Song of Deborah in Judges 5 is constructed so as to elicit our contempt for Sisera's mother, Gouri's poem works precisely in the opposite direction to elicit our emphatic identification with the pain and loss she has yet to experience fully.

The first hint of a differing point of view is in the very title of the poem. We are introduced to "His Mother," an epithet with a generic ring entirely devoid of the negative, derisive connotations associated with the name Sisera. Who, after all, can be against just anyone's mother? If anything, the word "mother" elicits an immediate positive response. In Judges 5, by contrast, as we noted above, this woman is *Sisera's* mother—with all the negatives implied—from the very moment we meet her.

In the Song of Deborah the poet leads us through the bloody scene of Sisera's downfall, and its attendant exaltation of Jael who performed the awful deed, to the palace scene of Sisera's mother and her ladies anxiously awaiting news of anticipated victory over Israel. We observe and gloat over what the mother does not yet know. But Gouri, or at least his poetic narrator, reverses the order of these scenes. First he introduces us

8. See, for example, the remarks of Laya Firestone and others in Schwartz and Rudolf (1980, pp. 12–13, 98) or of Megged (1971–72, *ad loc.*). Mintz (1984, pp. 239–44) offers opinion on shifts in Gouri's perspective evoked by his coverage of the Eichmann trial.

9. *ʔImmô* is reproduced here from the Shoken Books publication by Burnshaw, Carmi and Spicehandler (1965, p. 158), along with the accompanying translation by Dan Pagis. The poem also has been translated by Bernard Frank (1980, p. 75) and Ruth Finer-Mintz in Birman (1968, pp. 223–24).

to the watching mother and the ladies, drawing us in to their listening, waiting, wondering.

Indeed, from the beginning the narrator is not content merely to observe—or to let us observe—, like an outsider or a spy, the mother watching at the windows. Nor does he merely listen in on the conversation between the mother and her wise ladies. Instead, he listens *with* her and hears *with* her the “silence of Sisera’s chariots which were late in coming.” “I heard,” he says, “while I looked.”

Next, he adds, rather poignantly, that she has a “streak of silver in her hair.” As Dan Pagis observes (in Burnshaw, *et al.*, 1965, p. 159), this image serves to create an emotional tone that draws us to her: “The enemy’s mother, an aging woman, is waiting, like every mother, for the safe return of her son.” Unlike the tone of triumphant *Schadenfreude* that turns us against Sisera’s mother in the Song of Deborah, here we are gently prepared to enter into the old woman’s loss and, perhaps later, to lament with her. Only after the introduction of this silver-haired mother does the poem go on to describe the ironic situation of the palace women envisioning spoil of embroidered clothing. No ambiguity here as we are accustomed to in our usual readings of Judg 5:29. The mother—and I—are watching and listening anxiously at the window; the maidens (*hannē‘ārôt*) are seeing/fantasizing the spoil of fancy clothing.

But Sisera already lies “like one asleep”—dead, actually!—“traces of milk, butter and blood on his chin” and his hands *rêqôt mē’ôd*, ‘very empty.’ It is that sense of emptiness, we feel, that pervades this poem. It is an emptiness, as it were, that can be seen and heard, yes, even touched.

Unlike Deborah’s Song there is no language of blessing and curse in “His Mother,” which finds voice, after all, “at the end of Deborah’s Song.” Rather, the language is of looking that ends in darkness and of hearing that ends in silence. All this we see: “I looked at Sisera’s mother,” “Sisera’s mother watching at the window,” “Spoil of embroidery the maidens saw.” All this we see. But we also see the silver streak of aging in his mother’s hair, and Sisera asleep and emptyhanded, and the twilight that has gone out. And, although the land is now at peace and the felled horsemen no longer stare with the glassy eyes of death, we see that awful wide-eyed stare that cannot see. All this we see, as in the darkness of long ago.

And there is silence, a silence that binds together Sisera’s chariots late in coming, Sisera himself lying in the tent, the women one after the next, the land now calmed, the chariots and horses no longer galloping and

clattering, their dead horsemen—and “his mother,” who died a short time after her son’s demise. Bound, furthermore, into this silence are the narrator, whose “silence touched their silence,” and, by extension, we who enter into the poem and its sense of universal loss and quiet. All have become partners to the silence.

In a final reversal, there is no climactic exultation: “May all the enemies of YHWH perish thus, but his allies go forth like the rising sun!” Here enemies and allies, friend and foe simply do not figure in the scheme of things anymore. As for the sun, “After a while the sun set, after a while the twilight went out.”

Neither cursed nor blessed, “his mother” passes—as shall we, we feel—into the darkness and the silence that already had enveloped her son.

Conclusion

Gouri’s poem is, of course, only one of hundreds of literary creations that have drawn upon and developed Biblical scenes and stories. My experience has been that the best of them, like Milton’s *Paradise Lost* or MacLeish’s *J.B.* or even the wonderful midrash on the plague of darkness in the deuterocanonical Book of Wisdom, are fascinating and captivating because they move so daringly and imaginatively into new vistas perhaps never envisioned by the implied or real authors of their Biblical sources. But more. They have great energizing and heuristic value. They help enlarge our view of the Biblical texts by impelling us to return to them with new questions, different angles of interest, and sharpened ears and eyes that may perceive nuances and implications ignored or overlooked during earlier reading.

Surely, Gouri’s masterful poem, drawn in part from his own experiences of wars and their aftermath, may serve in similar fashion to help enlarge our appreciation of the Song of Deborah in Judges 5. The mother of Sisera, without her own proper name and waiting hopelessly outside the blessing may, nevertheless, be “His Mother,” who stands in solidarity with everyone whose silence touches hers.

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Appendix 1: Pattern of Blessing and Curse in Judges 5

verse

- 2 — BRK: brkw YHWH 3 YHWH // YHWH ʔlhy yśrʔl
 4 YHWH bšʔtk
 5 YHWH zh syny // YHWH ʔlhy yśrʔl
- 6 y^cl (Jael)
- 7 dbwrh // ʔm byśrʔl (Deborah // mother in Israel)
 8 ybħr ʔlhym ḥdšym
- 9 — BRK: brkw YHWH
 11 YHWH . . . byśrʔl . . . ^cm YHWH
- 12 | dbwrh // dbry šyr (Deborah // utter a song)
 | brq // bn ʔbyn^cm (Baraq // son of Abinoam)
 | 13 ^cm YHWH
- 15 | dbrh // brq (Deborah // Baraq)
 | — — — — —
 16 lmh
 17 lmh
- 20 sysrʔ (Sisera)
- 23 ʔRR: ʔwrw mrwz ʔmr mlʔk YHWH
 ʔRR: ʔrw ʔrwr yšbyh
 ʔRR: ^czrt YHWH // ^czrt YHWH
- 24 — BRK: tbrk mnšym y^cl // ^cst ḥbr hqyny //
 y^ʔl mnšym bʔhl tbrk
 — BRK: (Jael // wife of Heber the Qenite)
- 26 sysrʔ (Sisera)
- 27 šdwd
- 28 ʔm sysrʔ (the mother of Sisera)
 mdw^c //
 mdw^c
 29 ḥkmwt śrwtyh
 30 šll // rḥm rḥmtym
 šll . . . lsysrʔ (Sisera) // šll
 šll
- 31 ʔBD: yʔbdw kl ʔwybyk
 YHWH
 YŠʔ: ʔhbyw kšʔt ḥšmš bgbrtw (cp. vv. 13, 23, 30)

Appendix 2

אָמו

- לפני שנים, בסוף שירת דבורה,
שמעתי את דומית רכב סיסרא אשר בושש לבוא,
מביט באמו של סיסרא הנשקפת בחלון,
אשה שפס כסף בשערה. 3
- שלל צבעים רקמה,
צבע רקמות לצווארי שלל, ראו הנערות.
אותה שעה שכב באהל כנרדם.
ידיו ריקות מאד.
על סנטרו עקבות חלב חמאה ודם. 6 9
- הדומיה לא נשברה אל הסוסים ואל המרכבות,
גם הנערות שתקו אחת אחר אחת.
שתיקתי ננצה בשתיקתן.
אחר זמן-מה שקעה השמש.
אחר זמן-מה קבו הדמדומים. 12
- ארבעים שנה שקטה הארץ. ארבעים שנה
לא דהרו סוסים ופרשים מתים לא נעצו עיני זכוכית.
אכל היא מתה, זמן קצר אחר מות בנה. 15

HIS MOTHER

translated by Dan Pagis

(1) *Years ago, at the end of the Song of Deborah,*
(2) *I heard the quiet of Sisera's chariots, which*
were late in coming, (3) As I looked at Sisera's
mother watching at the window, (4) A woman
whose hair is a streak of silver.

(5) *A prey of divers colors of needlework (6)*
Divers colors of needlework on both sides meet
for the necks of them that take the spoil [Judges
5:30], the maidens say; (7) At that very moment
he lay like a sleeper in the tent; (8) His hands
[were] very empty. (9) On his chin, traces of milk,
butter, and blood.

(10) *The quiet was not shattered by [lit. to] the horses and the chariots; (11) The maidens also fell silent, one after the other. (12) My silence touched their silence. (13) After a while, the sun set. (14) After a while, the twilight went out.*

(15) *Forty years—the land was calm. Forty years (16) Horses did not gallop and dead horsemen did not stare with glassy eyes. (17) But she died a short time after her son's death.*